

Situating Literacy Leadership Within the ISLLC Standards for Education Administration

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Abstract

Over the past decade, the ISLLC Standards for Educational Administration have become increasingly recognized as a universal structure to guide the thoughts and actions of school principals seeking to increase school performance and improve individual student achievement. More recently, caring and passionate principals throughout the United States have become intrigued by, or interested in, the idea of literacy leadership as a vehicle for whole-school improvement and, from a humanistic standpoint, a moral obligation to fulfill. This essay situates effective literacy leadership into the six ISLLC standards for educational administration, illuminating how principals might successfully lead school-wide literacy efforts while adhering, with fidelity, to the six ISLLC standards. Enlightened school leaders realize the dream of democracy requires a literate citizenry and recognize that to a degree the principal shoulders the responsibility.

Today's school principal operates within a system of ever-increasing complexities, influenced by the breakdown of the nuclear family, frequent paradigm shifts within society, and an increased responsibility to perform in an era of educational accountability. Blaydes (2004) affirms "the role of the principal has changed significantly in the past few years as a result of the impact of high-stakes accountability in schools" (p. 3).

To overcome these challenges, principals benefit from embracing actions which blur research and theory into everyday practice, forming an effective praxis of educational leadership. Further, the caring and committed principal develops a set of specific skills, enabling greater success in overcoming pressing challenges. For example, principals throughout the nation are guided by a set of six professional standards issued by the National Policy Board of Education Administration (NPBEA). The core competencies are known as the ISLLC standards (Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium) of educational administration (Council of Chief State School Officials, 2008). These six specified performance standards have grown in importance over the last decade. According to Maxcy (2002), the ISLLC standards have been most influential in moving educational administration forward. These standards seek to illuminate an operational framework and provide job clarity for the educational leader, including the school principal. All principal practices should find alignment, either directly or indirectly, within the ISLLC standards. Principals who satisfy each of the ISLLC standards should be considered as highly effective principals within their field.

Principals should lead their campuses and operate all aspects of the principalship by situating those activities within the ISLLC standards for school administration. One issue gaining currency is the practice of initiating and maintaining a systemic school-wide literacy effort (Irvin, Meltzer, & Dukes, 2007). Today's principals should practice literacy leadership within the confines of the ISLLC standards. By operating within those standards, principals will succeed at establishing the literacy learning environments that they desire for the school and student population.

Multiple definitions exist for defining the term *literacy*; however, for the purposes of this essay, *literacy* will simply be defined as the ability to read and write. A more complex definition of literacy has not been universally accepted. However, while not included in the definition of literacy for this paper, it should be noted that a democratic citizen would use their learned literacy to actively contribute to the society as a whole and enlightened school leaders would find means for not only creating cultures for learning literacy, but also provide environments where students engage in democratic activity, which prepares them for democratic vocation and democratic life. Dewey (1916) contends that the "isolation of these studies from practical application, their reduction to purely symbolic devices, represent a survival of the idea of a liberal training divorced from utility" (p. 258). In such, school leaders should seek to achieve the ISLLC standards and situate literacy leadership within each of those standards.

The importance of individuals gaining literacy is significant, while the detriments from illiteracy substantially and negatively impact one's life. More than any other source, schools must accept the responsibility for ensuring literacy for all students, allowing them to ultimately become functioning members of our democracy and allowing our democracy to continue. Early Americans recognized that education and literacy, as part of such education, was a requisite for our

freedom. James Madison, the fourth President of the United States, understood the importance that education held for our perseverance as a nation when he noted, “A well instructed people alone can be permanently a free people.” More currently, in relation to literacy’s impact on a democratic society, Prah (2007) stated, “In a practical sense, citizenship is incapacitated if citizens are illiterate” and further concluded the “ability to understand social policy processes is seriously curtailed” (p. 7). Both the simplicities and complexities of the democratic principle coming to fruition within a society require a literate citizenry.

The skillful efforts of passionate, visionary, and courageous leaders are a necessity toward reaching renewed literacy expectations. As evidenced through a growing body of academic research and empirical data, successful school literacy efforts are vital to lifetime success and require capable and concerned leaders who are tirelessly committed to literacy education from both a technical and programmatic perspective (Carbo, 1997). Principals successful in building flourishing literacy cultures within schools are capable of situating literacy leadership within the six ISLLC standards. Essentially, effective literacy leadership may be applied through each of the following standards.

ISLLC Standard # 1 (Visionary Leadership)

The first ISLLC standard requires educational leaders who promote the success of every student by facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a vision of learning that is shared and supported by all stakeholders. Murphy and Lewis (1994) found that “helping to formulate a vision” is “a critical function of principals working to facilitate significant change at their schools” (p. 31). Without an established vision, decisions and actions within schools are made at random without a lucid purpose.

Principals seeking positive change in the literacy achievements of students find value in the creation of a literacy-rich culture within the school. Establishing a literacy culture requires a highly calculated, methodical, and overt approach by a passionate and ambitious principal. Booth and Rowsell (2007) believe, “literacy stands as one of the most effective vehicles for school change” because “literacy ensures success in other curriculum areas” (p. 21). When students have the ability to read, they are able to appropriately engage in the available curriculum. Principals willing to make a significant commitment to school-wide literacy spend valuable time in professional learning activities such as literacy-needs determinations, visits to successful literacy campuses, attendance at reputable literacy conferences, and reviews of literacy-related text.

One of the foremost actions necessary in the establishment and realization of a shared literacy vision is creation of a literacy leadership team that collaboratively develops the school’s literacy vision and sustains that vision throughout the scope of school operations. As an active and valued participant in the literacy leadership team, the principal helps create a “shared vision of what the

institution is seeking to accomplish” (Boyer, 1995, p. 15). Blankstein (2004) believes effective visions are “vivid and compelling” and “motivate us to strive for an improved future” (p. 78). In this case, the vision inspires stakeholders to believe the students will have a better tomorrow because of the school’s literacy efforts. Once the overarching vision is created, the team sets specific and attainable literacy-related goals for the year. Booth and Rowsell (2007) believe that principals “create coherence through a specific and detailed literacy plan” (p. 21). The school’s literacy plan outlines the methods for achieving the vision, including a route to accomplishment of the year’s specific goals.

Once the plan is determined, it is appropriately communicated to all stakeholders, eliminating any blurred understandings within and without the walls of the school. Implementing a successful literacy initiative requires consistency in delivery throughout the school. The school’s faculty should have the available resources to achieve the vision, and both students and parents should understand their responsibilities in the process. According to Lunenberg and Ornstein (2008), communication is the lifeblood of every school organization that serves to link vision to actions. Vision development is the necessary beginning for the establishment of a literacy culture within a school.

ISLLC Standard #2 (Instructional Leadership)

The second standard requires educational leaders who promote the success of every student by advocating, nurturing, and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth. Principals create an environment in which teachers improve as professional educators and student learning flourishes. The visible and hidden curriculum is indicative of literacy as an important and vital component of the school’s purpose.

Principals engage in literacy-related professional development to gain credibility and competence as instructional literacy leaders. The principal’s involvement in professional development serves myriad purposes including: (1) modeling the need for professional growth, (2) gaining an increased knowledge of literacy, and (3) networking with literacy experts and professional colleagues. Without becoming an active participant in professional literacy learning, the principal loses alignment between espoused values and values-in-use.

Often, educators use the term learning community (Blankstein, 2004; Dufour, Dufour, Eaker, & Karhank, 2004) to describe a shared and collaborative interest in professional growth within a school. Principals seek to ensure that professional learning shifts from the level of optional to that of expectation. While professional development is frequently conducted off-campus, as instructional leaders, principals should also lead job-embedded growth opportunities on-campus. The professional development of teachers through literacy learning should become a priority for all schools. Teachers improve in both the delivery of technical craft and understanding of programmatic initiatives to support learning in the

areas of phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Principals continually emphasize the importance of effective practices and are relentless in ensuring that those procedures are taking place within the school. More than simply inspecting classroom practices, principals provide observational constructive feedback with the intent of instructional improvement.

Smith and Andrews (1989) believe principals must possess “knowledge and skill in curriculum and instructional matters so that teachers perceive that their interaction with the principal leads to improved instructional practice” (p. 23). Principals must have a working knowledge of the instructional practices, strategies, and programs necessary for improved literacy learning on their campuses. Moreover, principals should lead job-embedded cluster meetings for modeling of instructional practices, disaggregation of student data, re-emphasis of goals, and professional collaboration.

Literacy leadership is essential for making the “instructional changes needed to raise student achievement” (National Governor’s Association, 2005, p. 20). Instructional literacy leadership should be viewed as a necessary and welcome obligation to principals from both a moral imperative and accountability standpoint.

ISLLC Standard #3 (Organizational Leadership)

The third standard requires educational leaders who promote the success of every student by ensuring management of the organization, operation, and resources for a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment. Principals communicate to all stakeholders that behind student health and safety, academic learning and literacy competency are the school’s top priorities. It must be taken with seriousness and urgency that the school is passionate and committed to its educational mission, vision, values, and goals. Sadly, some schools have not held learning with the prestigious respect it deserves. Educators will find increased academic success with a greater emphasis on literacy throughout all grade levels and all content areas.

Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005) believe it is “not uncommon for a school to keep certain practices in place and unchallenged for years and even decades simply because of their historical status” (p. 44). Many traditional practices in school have been proven to be ineffective or insufficient. Principals recognize that some organizational structures are outdated and unacceptable. Collins (2001) believes, “when you start with an honest and diligent effort to determine the truth of the situation, the right decisions often become self-evident,” and “you absolutely cannot make a series of good decisions without first confronting the brutal facts” (p. 70). Fortunately for school principals, there is an ever-increasing body of new results-oriented data related to improved student literacy. Then the responsibility of the committed principal is to create an organization that practices and celebrates effective and efficient logistics that leads to improved student literacy learning. This re-culturing of an inferior or status quo campus is a

daunting, often problematic, and stressful vocation. Barth (2001) affirmed that “probably this most important—and the most difficult—job of the school-based reformer is to change the prevailing culture of a school” toward excellence (p. 7).

In supporting literacy from an organizational standpoint, a primary responsibility is the allocation and structure of time. Older scheduling models often structured academic time around cafeteria and physical education schedules, especially in elementary schools. Academic scheduling must be the first consideration. The principal should protect all classroom time, serving as a protector of learning and allowing no interruptions to occur. Once a conscientious attempt is made and fulfilled at protecting instructional time, principals will perceive how frequently instruction was interrupted prior to the new policy. Further, through scheduling the organization provides collaborative opportunities teachers. Ubben, Hughes, and Norris (2007) found that “one of the most important features of any schedule involving a team of teachers working as a learning community is the provision of adequate team planning time” (p. 246). The logistics of every campus differs; however, an effective principal finds ways to provide shared planning time for clusters of teachers in the same grade levels in elementary and core content areas in secondary schools.

Another important, and necessary, component of organizational leadership to support literacy is the allocation of resources through budgeting. Making school-wide literacy a priority requires principals to “put their money where their mouths are.” For too long, budgets have been made in a reactionary pattern. Instead, prioritization of resources is necessary to achieve the literacy vision and identified goals. Seldom will a principal attain and allocate all necessary resources within a single year; a multi-year budgetary plan may be necessary to acquire the necessary capital and provide the necessary professional support for the literacy priority.

A successful school leader overtly places literacy as a core component of organizational operations and understands that learning is irrevocably linked to literacy and reciprocally, and that literacy is essential to learning. In fact, one should recognize that learning to read and reading to learn happens simultaneously and continuously for the students within our schools (Robb, 2010). Instead of accepting the school in its present state, principals proactively create an organization that exemplifies systematic, explicit, and successful campus literacy practices.

ISLLC Standard #4 (Collaborative Leadership)

The fourth standard requires educational leaders who promote the success of every student to collaborate with faculty and community members, respond to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilize community resources. Over the past decade, educators have increasingly realized hope for effective literacy efforts through an open collaboration among the school, researchers,

philosophers, and all stakeholders. Senge (1994) found, “it’s just not possible any longer to figure it out from the top and have everyone else following the orders of the grand strategist”; but instead, “the organizations that will truly excel in the future will be the organizations that discover how to tap people’s commitment and capacity to learn at all levels in an organization” (p. 4). Principals rely on the entire organization to achieve literacy success, including the administrative team, teachers, instructional coach, intervention staff, and librarian. Principals prioritize a school literacy culture and make staffing decisions with this in mind. Then, once staff is in place, the principal provides opportunities for professional growth and collaboration. Wheatley (2006) found that “successful organizations” have realized that when stakes are high it is necessary “to engage everyone’s commitment and intelligence” (p. 491).

Barth (2001) offered an interesting consideration by asking, “I wonder how many children’s lives might be saved if we educators disclosed what we know to each other” (p. 60). This can be accomplished by working together to meet the diverse needs of students. Professional adults within the school, seeking to truly enhance student success through meaningful, engaged learning practices, including strategic literacy strategies and initiatives, must collaborate. Regular meetings are established and led by the principal, seeking to create a learning community within the campus that seek to explore data, model practices, and plan to meet specific school and learner needs. Dufour et al. (2004) believe “learning communities offer the most powerful conceptual model for transforming schools to meet their new challenges” (p. 2). As schools begin the process of systemically addressing literacy, a collaborative culture is necessary. Principals drastically shift from “one-room-schoolhouse” practices of the past toward building open-information campuses prepared to educate and compete within the global market.

Booth and Rowsell (2007) indicate that “literacy initiatives in schools are most effective if there is a whole-school commitment to creating literacy-based school change” through collaborative efforts with each other (p. 92). Through their work in vision creation, relevant instructional leadership, and supporting professional development, literacy-leading principals build a capacity of shared leadership within their campuses. Leading a school-wide literacy effort is a demanding responsibility and cannot be shouldered alone. Instead, principals prepare the instructional staff and, because of relational trust, afford them the opportunity to effectively complete their assignments.

Principals leading a dynamic literacy effort also maximize support from the community, namely parental support. A strategic marketing endeavor is led by the principal to inform parents of the vision, goals, and plan to achieve heightened levels of literacy. The adage that parents “don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care” comes to a new level of understanding and importance. Fullan (1997) found that nothing motivates a child more than when the school and the family at home value learning. Parents realize the school’s

passionate and dedicated approach to literacy is not only a matter of school performance, but is a deeper attempt at tackling issues of care and social justice. A message is presented to parents that *failure is not an option*. An effective principal communicates this message through parent informational nights, speaking at community engagements, and through both print and electronic media. Ubben et al. (2007) articulate that school leaders must value the contributions of families as a valuable part of the educational system. Within this new paradigm for schooling, principals are responsible for creating collaborative communities both inside and outside of the school. Teachers will work interdependently, and the community will understand and support continuous improvement towards the literacy vision. As schools begin the process of systemically addressing literacy, a collaborative culture is necessary.

ISLLC Standard #5 (Ethical Leadership)

The fifth standard requires educational leaders who promote the success of every student by acting with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner. Principals personally and professionally display appropriate ethical behavior. Individuals see their servant-leader as one with unwavering integrity. Hunter (2004) defined integrity as, “behaving out of right values consistently and predictably, both in public as well as in private” for the good of self and of the whole (p. 109). Modeling ethical literacy practices and gaining credibility are imperative for faculty growth and student literacy achievement. Kouzes (1998) believes credibility is about connecting voice and touch, about practicing what you preach, about doing what you say you will do (p. 324). Credible principals confront both simple and complex situations on the “right side” of ethics. Rockler (2004) found that “on any school day, professional educators face a myriad of problems that contain moral dilemmas” and principals must “constantly examine ethical questions” in daily practice (p. 15). Fullan (1993) found that “teaching at its core is a moral profession” and effective teachers have a “moral purpose” (p. 12). Principals often work in school systems that are ethically fragmented within and influenced by an ethically challenged world. Witcher (2003) believes that “by consistently demonstrating a system that both addresses the issue effectively and is ethically and morally based, administrators can demonstrate that such a system is not only possible; it is better” (p. 29).

Once an individual accepts a position of formal leadership such as the principalship, one assumes the responsibility of ethical behavior. Further, the principal should understand the moral imperative of leadership. At its core, the principalship is a moral obligation to those being served. Dantley (2004) states, “the moral context of school leadership moves beyond merely holding education leaders responsible for doing things right” but instead it “compels them to do the right thing” (p. 44). Ensuring literacy for all students is more than simply a job for the principal; moreover, it is a moral responsibility to be accomplished. Literate

adults enjoy many benefits not extended to those adults suffering from illiteracy. For example, literate adults have greater lifetime earnings, experience healthier lives, and have greater levels of civic participation. Fundamentally, the right to literacy is a requisite within a democratic method of schooling. Illiterate individuals are denied full democratic participation that inhibits their humanization, but also forces the literate to assume a greater responsibility for their care. Giroux (2003) believes:

... educators need to re-appropriate the belief that academic work matters in its relationship to wider public practices and policies and that there is a necessity for educators and others to link educational work, both within and outside the schools, to what it means to expand the scope of democracy. (p. 12)

Adults incapable of reading have received, either through familial complications, societal failures, or educational misgivings, an unjust lifetime sentence. While students are under a school's care, with unwavering resolve, literacy must be guaranteed for each child, assuring greater opportunities for success in our democracy. Principals are expected to seek fair and ethical resolutions to literacy-related injustices; in addition, literacy-focused principals ask critical questions about current practices, ensuring a system of accountability for every student's academic success. It is vital that principals ensure equity throughout the campus, realizing that students need differing services, supports, and resources at different times. Literacy instruction and interventions are differentiated, data-driven, research-proven, and provide appropriate student responses. In short, it is the principal's responsibility to ensure that individual student needs inform all aspects of schooling, including the assurance of literacy. Through the ethical and moral action of ensuring literacy, principals are doing the right thing. A principal who does not present an overarching vision and comprehensive plan for inclusive literacy is denying American citizens the right to liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

ISLLC Standard #6 (Political Leadership)

The sixth standard requires educational leaders who promote the success of every student to understanding, respond to, and influence the political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context. Most principals rarely consider their political leadership and many consider themselves quite apolitical. In stark contrast, the literacy-minded principal advocates for children, families, and caregivers by seeking necessary literacy funding, legislation, and overall support.

Successful principals boldly promote the importance of educational matters to lawmakers and community members and, specifically, increase awareness of literacy throughout the political arena. Duffy (2003) found that "effective leadership in organizations results from the skillful interplay of power, politics, and ethics" (p. 14). Murphy and Louis (1994) believe, "principals today have a special

responsibility to serve as advocates for just treatment for all” (p. 13). Today’s principals promote the need for literacy funding by inviting elected officials to campus literacy events and communicating with elected officials through both written and verbal contact. If educators neglect to advocate the need for governmental literacy support, who will? And without literacy for all, our society cannot fully function as a democracy.

Literacy achievement depends on necessary resources from all levels of government. Recent literacy successes have been noticed in the political arena as evidenced by reports from the Alliance for Excellent Education, National Governor’s Center for Best Practices, Institution for Education Sciences, and the Southern Regional Education Board. A continued push for greater literacy rewards is carried forward by judicious principals who understand the literacy turf-battles within the schools and have effective plans to navigate the murky waters of promoting and achieving school-wide literacy. Also, when provided governmental resources, schools allocate the capital wisely to ensure student academic gains in the area of literacy. In our era of accountability, without quantifiable results, the well of literacy funding may become increasingly shallow.

Conclusions

The responsibilities placed on today’s principals to ensure literacy for all students are demanding. However, through situating literacy leadership into the accepted ISLLC standards, principals will find worthwhile gains in student literacy achievement. One will find that the standards work simultaneously with each other, and efficiency and effectiveness of literacy efforts improve through a combination of all six ISLLC standards. Principals hold a critical role in the successful implementation of literacy efforts on their campuses. They should find excitement and gratification from using their power and authority for the common good of literacy for all and through proper adherence to the six ISLLC standards. Further, through successful literacy leadership, students will find heightened levels of knowledge and understanding, further supporting the facets of the democratic idea within our society. Literacy goes beyond the student; instead, literacy hugely affects our society as a whole. Knowing this, principals must provide active and assertive literacy leadership under the umbrella of actions guided by the ISLLC standards for school administration.

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